

Former Chicago Crusader Sports Editor William Claire Harding Transformed the NFL

Campaign Seeks Long Overdue Recognition for the Journalist Who Reopened Professional Football to Black Athletes

LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES, September 2, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- As the NFL officially opens the 2026 season, recognition is being seek for William Claire "Halley" Harding for his fight to desegregate the National Football League (NFL) 80 Years ago.

That's right, in 1946, a full year before Jackie Robinson broke the color line in Major League Baseball, Harding, a former Negro League Baseball player turned sports editor, led the force to desegregate the NFL, which today is America's most popular and successful pro sport of which 65% of its players and coaches are African Americans.

The Chicago Crusader Newspaper Group, where Harding worked, is launching a campaign with Harding's nephew to secure greater recognition for this important contribution to professional sports and American society.

"Halley Harding sought talent being denied and understood that the NFL could not reach its full potential while qualified Black athletes were kept outside its doors,' said Dorothy R.



William Claire Harding Sports Editor



Woody Strode, Jackie Robinson and Kenny Washington, UCLA Running Backs

Leavell, Owner and Publisher of the Chicago Crusader Newspaper. ["He challenged an injustice, but he also helped professional football become better. The players who followed enriched the sport, strengthened its teams and inspired millions of people."](#)

Harding's actions helped change more than the composition of NFL rosters. The NFL that developed after desegregation benefited immeasurably from the talent, leadership and cultural influence of Black players, coaches and executives.

In 1945, Harding was working at the Black Owned Los Tribune Newspaper when the Cleveland Rams sought to relocate to Los Angeles and play at the publicly owned Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

No African American athlete had played or coached in the NFL since 1933 as White NFL Owners maintained a racial pact known as "The Gentlemen's Agreement," that excluded them from the league.



William Claire Harding and his wife, Gladys

At the January 15, 1946 meeting of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission, Harding publicly challenged Rams' officials and other NFL Owners in attendance about their exclusion of Black athletes. He argued that a team seeking to play in a tax player supported public facility should not be permitted to discriminate.

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Dorothy R. Leavell, Owner and Publisher of the Chicago Crusader Newspaper.

Harding understood that the Rams' proposed use of a public stadium created an opportunity to demand change. He placed the issue before the team, Coliseum Commissioners, sports writers and public officials in attendance and the community at-large. Through his column "So What," public statements and intense support from the Black community, he helped intensify pressure on

the Ram's to provide legitimate opportunities for Black athletes.

As the result, on March 21, 1946, as Jackie Robinson looked on in support, the Los Angeles Rams signed former UCLA All American Kenny Washington. The Rams later signed his UCLA teammate

Woody Strode, who would later go on to become a celebrated movie actor.

Yet Harding never received the recognition he deserved comparable to the importance of the change he helped bring about.

The effects of that changed reached far beyond football. The visibility and achievements of Black professional athletes helped challenged racial assumptions, expand representation in American public life and provide new examples of excellence and leadership for young people.

["I am proud of my Uncle and what he did," Geoff Harding said.](#) "His story showed that one person's courage can help change an institution, and a changed institution can help change the world." Adding, in 2021, the Los Angeles Times published a front page story about his efforts. At the 2022 Super Bowl Viola Davis recognized him in a three minute televised tribute. In August, 2022, the National Association of Black Journalists posthumously awarded him their coveted "Pioneer Award. It is time that all of America learns about his historical American journey and story."

Harding's storied accomplishments have been recently captured in copyrighted script form. Plans are being considered for a film version of the screenplay.

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